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FLARR Pages #3: Teaching Cyrano

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"Teaching Cyrano"

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French director Jean-Paul Rappeneau's Cyrano, starring Gerard Depardieu, is an exciting vehicle for teaching French language, literature, and culture. Its lavish images and compelling themes for a student audience (heroic individualism, the apprenticeship of love and language) never fail to capture the interest of a class. I have returned to Cyrano many times--just this past week I used a few scenes from the film to present "préciosité."

Cyrano is especially useful for teaching the history of the theater. In his critical introduction to the Classiques Larousse edition of Cyrano de Bergerac, the play on which the movie is based, Patrick Pavis calls Cyrano "an experimental crucible of all the techniques of theater...an excellent introduction to European drama from classicism to naturalism" (12).

Adding Rappeneau's film to this historical survey of the theater, one could say that Cyrano is a commentary on the history of French drama and film. Cyrano is an ideal laboratory for studying the techniques of film and theater and analyzing how one spectacle has succeeded the other. Thematically and formally it tells the story of how, in the words of Jean-Marie Apostolidès "Cinema has destroyed today what the theater once constructed..." (Oeuvres et Critiques XVI (1991) 22).

A particular scene in Cyrano is useful for teaching all of these ideas, both historical and theoretical: it is the scene in which Cyrano appears at the Hôtel de Bourgogne to disrupt a play and eventually takes the stage himself. Students will learn much from Rappeneau's careful reconstruction of the great theater house where the plays of Corneille, Molière, and Racine were first performed. They might want to build a model of Bourgogne, much like students of Shakespeare build models of

the Globe Theater.

The scene can be studied for its classical, romantic, and naturalistic elements. Cyrano, the exorbitant romantic individual, takes over the stage from the excessively stylized classical actor, Montfleury. Both are grotesque caricatures of what they represent. Naturalistic elements in the scene include the realistic portrayal of eating, drinking, and thievery and the study of class dynamics. The romantic sense of history, as opposed to the timelessness of classicism is also evident. The classical drama of Monfleury, situated in an undefined past of Greek myth is replaced by an historical drama, a specific turbulent moment in time, a particular evening in a Paris theater house in 1640. Rostand achieved all of these effects by a stage-within-a-stage technique, by putting the reconstructed Hôtel de Bourgogne on stage in 1895.

The film repeats this gesture, but goes several steps farther. Rostand's stage is itself framed by cinema. Cyrano makes his first entry from a uniquely cinematic position; we are first aware of him as a disembodied voice speaking off camera, shouting at Montfleury to leave the stage. Cyrano is initially a cinematic spectator, like us. A major theme of Rostand's play is the separation of the body from the voice and the possibility of one person supplying a voice for another, a theme which is enhanced by the artificiality of the cinema. In another gesture without precedent in the play, Depardieu actually takes his sword to the ropes and pulleys of the stage machinery; he deconstructs the stage. Rappeneau's film enacts, literally, Apostolidès's idea that film destroys the theater. Its mobile camera can go behind the scenes of the classical theater and reveal its inner working. It can multiply points of view. There is not one "classical," perspective on things but instead many. There is no longer the same consensus; each viewer, like Cyrano, is summoned to tear apart the theatrical spectacle and make his or her own sense out of it. In the cinema, there is no longer the same physical confrontation between actor and spectator; a movie is not a unique ritual which binds together audience and actors in a single performance, but rather, something which can be endlessly repeated by each viewer, especially in the age of the VCR. We are anonymous, dispersed consumers of images, not a theater audience galvanized by a hero. We have became modern, technological Cyranos, creating our own fantasies in the cinemas of our own imaginations. Like Cyrano we feel a desparate need for community, and we seek out the company of like-minded fantasizers like ourselves. Students and teachers can form, however briefly, such a community of individual consumers, creative "destroyers," like Cyrano, of theatrical images from the past.